

The Results and Main Findings of my Phd Dissertation

Bokor Zsuzsa

Institutions of Prostitution in Change in Interwar Cluj (Kolozsvár)

The Object of the Analysis

At the beginning of my research I considered that I would like write some kind of social history of the prostitutes of Cluj from the interwar period. There was a private collection of sources at my command (documents recorded in the Women's Hospital in that time), containing among others 151 surveys with prostitutes, a few life stories, two diaries and quite a few letters. While I was getting acquainted with these sources it has become obvious to me, that in order to formulate an accurate explanation about the situation of prostitution and about the life of the prostitutes, I shall give an answer to other questions first, like why had it become the speech on prostitution so important in that period, why had it become a frequent topic? This process of research meant that I had to dig deeper and deeper: first in time, thus I have gone back to the first local regulations on prostitution from the 19th century, and to the discourse that was connected to them. Further more, this meant the integration of several problems from the thematic point of view, being forced to be aware of many questions from the situation of maids up to the dealing of venereal disease. My sources have been growing in number, and so have been my questions too, and the answers to these needed more time and the research of more areas that I have first expected. As a consequence my work did not turn into a classic monograph of prostitution history about the institutes of prostitution and prostitutes themselves, although that was the initial idea. The individual lives within the research have stepped out from their static position, and through them, with them I have arrived to the point of answering several other socio-historical questions.

Within my work I have analyzed on the one hand the ways how in the two decades after WWI the question of prostitution became embedded into a larger process of institutionalization and social change, and led to the organization of a complex institutional network around it, becoming a part of a specific political and medical discourse. A part of my sources were represented by the inner publications of the medical

circle, the materials of medical conferences, and the other part was formed of the materials aiming the large public (materials of propaganda, motion pictures, posters, studies, volumes, and a large amount of newspaper articles) and those rules and regulations which were in most cases the results of these medical debates.

After WWI the city of Cluj had to face significant economical and social changes. One of the basic problems of the public discourse of that era was the mass that could not be controlled or seen through, the homecoming soldiers, the strangers, the growing number of people with venereal disease off treatment, the prostitutes, and the victims of tuberculosis. The economical and social processes were written into basic political changes, as a new power situation was in formation, and Romanians found themselves in the situation of being in majority and holding power and initiative. The new power declared the reinterpretation of society's basic components, the liquidation of postwar chaos and the clean-up of all remains from the *incorrect* functioning of the previous political system.

The analysis of the medical text corpus made possible the outlining of a larger institutional and normative framework, which led to the understanding of the relational methods and practices of those times concerning people with venereal disease and prostitutes. One of the conclusions of my work is that within the reformulation of the problem of prostitution and its integration into the national discourse a major role had those Romanian doctors, who could fill up the new places in the medical school or other medical institutions after WWI and the change of power, or who were a part in the formation of new institutions, becoming also the leaders of these. Thus the series of measures taken regarding prostitution were first of all tools for the newly formatting power seeking for its place, as with one or another grandiose health registration program the new medical society could very well expose its legitimacy and the need for its functioning. As a part of the national plan new, to that point non-existing institutional system could be built, new rules and regulations were born, defining again and again the place of those infected with venereal disease (the unknown, the strangers, the prostitutes, those with non-normative sexual practices) within society and their subservience to medical knowledge. The regulations and their surrounding theoretical materials clearly exposed the social system that the central power wanted to imply and the way how sexual

differences were institutionalized through them. In my work I am also dealing with how the nation-fearing and nation-healing discourse met eugenics, and what mandatory elements were related to the problem of prostitution by it. Therefore my analysis desires to be – beyond the analysis of the relation between prostitution and the medical society – the history of relations along the oppositions between us and them, feminine and masculine, local and stranger, usual and unusual.

While for the makers of the regulations the body of the prostitute was a tractable body, or at least it should have become one in an ideal situation, there was another moral, basically non-political, local interpretational principle as well, which also had its own norms, but which was keen to continue regarding the prostitute as a naughty body, and to deal with her fate at its own pleasure. At most times the latter one enabled all forms of non-conventional sexuality, at least adapted to its own local conditions. In this work there is a place also for the analysis of this moral system of expectations through the local urban regulations and the press material reflecting on these as well as on the expectations of the citizens. Such division of power and the collision of local *versus* political directives are interesting also because most of the decision-makers of the national level were living exactly within the society of Cluj, and this aspect becomes even more exciting with the momentum of the closing of brothels.

In my work I am dealing with another level as well, which is in fact the society of the prostitutes submitted to norms and regulations, respectively being in continuous interaction with these. I have considered the “revelative” character of the micro-level optics important mainly at the point of interpreting the (contemporary and historical) categorization, the classification of the group of prostitutes; because through the analysis it has gradually turned out that this social group is not homogeneous, the characters within are not of the same status, they do not come from families with the same financial background, they have different levels of education, furthermore, they show similarities neither in their techniques of adaptation. It also turned out that the provocative outfit of the prostitutes, being regarded as their common cultural feature, did not mean for them the option of being different, as it does usually for subcultural groups, but served for differentiation, being formed under external pressure. What is then the thing that makes a woman prostitute? How is the group of prostitutes constructed, what kind of social

relations, what kind of external or internal forces give birth to them? This question led to the recognition of the fact that socio-professional categorization can be understood mainly from the inside, from the universe of the social actors, as we cannot work with the existence of the group of prostitutes as an evidence. The inner cognition of socio-professional categorization gives the possibility of understanding the deeper coherence of society and the social norms. In my case this road was even harder because usually in public speech, but often in the literature as well, the group of “prostitutes” is named as a professional group, existing from the beginning of time, dealing at the most with variants of this “group” differing in cultural and religious contexts, and it is very rare when it is taken into consideration how these groups were formed in different ages, what kind of internal or external forces were holding its members together.

It is obvious that even at this level the sources carry the fingerprints of power on them, as in many cases we are talking about medical documents (statistics and life stories recorded in hospitals), respectively about texts of the media very largely influenced by the medical discourse. However, they are specific by the fact that they show how the topic of prostitution, the discourse on prostitution resulted in the life of the women engaged in prostitution, and how it shaped and modified the prostitute category within the local community. Prostitution was more than a moral question or the target of public hygiene measures, while the prostitute was a heteromorph female figure, being forced or being able to show a different face in different contexts and situations, and whose existence was totally depending on the conditions that were made for her. Women undertaking the life of a prostitute, those identified and recorded as prostitutes were usually corresponding to these demands or on the contrary, they were trying to escape from them. The controlling power creating, delimiting and releasing “differentiated bodies” proposed different *conditions*: that of a deadbeat citizen woman, achieving accommodation and work in a brothel; or that of an “independent prostitute”, who was given place in rendezvous houses sometimes with the promise that the case will be dealt with discretion, other times being marked and excluded from the nation, that of the ill woman, for who the hospital or the dressmaker’s was created, etc. To these conditions different discourse elements, norms and judgments were related, these being present on the public level too, but also being interiorized within individual life stories.

The collision of values, the confrontation between social conditions and individual aspirations, the pressure to conform to the prostitute image constructed by the medical discourse is presented by the last chapter of my work, an analysis made by means of narrative biography.

Methods and Theories

Within my work I was focusing especially on the research strategies of gender history, which were formed within the feminist–post-structuralist paradigm, and as I was dealing with mostly women, men and relationships, writing about sexuality, the cultural symbols and constructions of gender, the topic brought along this theoretical point of view. It is obvious that the basic questions of gender history were answers to the new waves of social history, too, converging or diverging ones, therefore I would not tear out this wave from those schools of social history and research perspectives, that gender attaches to or that I am used to follow. I am thinking here about the well known patterns and points of view of microhistory and historical anthropology, about the French social scientists of the *nouvelle histoire*, respectively about those scholars of social history – especially on Anglo-Saxon territories – who were studying prostitution, eugenics, medical history or the history of sexuality. The methods of collection and analysis that I have been using most frequently were the collecting of documents from archives and libraries, respectively the text analysis. An important perspective of analysis was given by discourse analysis, as I had to explore how prostitution was created by the discourse about it, how prostitution as a social practice was shaped by the speech of power, and finally in what processes of representation formation had taken this power discourse concrete forms. As regarding the life stories I was working with narrative biography analysis, while the surveys with prostitutes were processed with computerized data analysis. Further more I have done – although in a quite fragmented manner – some analysis of visual representations.

The Structure of my Work

After the theoretical and methodological introduction I am starting with a kind of a terminological history critique, signaling the problematic character of the definition of

prostitution. In the following I am analyzing two consecutive city regulations which determined the discourses of the dualist era and the regulations regarding prostitution, respectively the debates that arose around them. Taking a look at the forms of prostitutes that appear in the legal regulations and the preparatory medical debates, we can understand the morphological (forced) changing of sexual behavior, thus we can observe the concrete results at the turn of the century, up to the 1930s, of the tendency regarding the rule over the human body, a tendency that can be observed starting with the end of the 19th century. In the next chapter I am taking a look at what kind of control mechanisms were generated within the medical society in Cluj after 1919. I am also making clear the basic notions of eugenics, extremely beloved by the Transylvanian and Romanian medical society, respectively I am analyzing how this scientific-genetic based us–them delimitation (pure *versus* impure, healthy *versus* diseased) was infiltrated into the fight against venereal diseases (thus against prostitutes), what kind of space organizing tendencies were born out of it, how did it move the social group that was considered deviant, and how did it define its cultural features. After this analysis based on more or less linear history of events a synchronic analysis follows within next chapters. Therefore this time living characters are in movement, however still within the frames that the power has created for them: the society of the prostitutes becomes visible through medical statistics and police reports. In the penultimate chapter the face, the image of the *prostitute* is outlined along the survey that was created in the hospital and handed out to 151 prostitutes. I am trying to answer here to the question if the prostitutes can be considered a (subcultural) group, in the socio-scientific sense of the term, respectively I will show in a larger analysis the kinds of transition existing between the different gender constructions related to women and to specific feminine groups (gentlewomen, maids) of that age. In the last chapter it is all about the prostitute figures already shaped somehow through the surveys, performing their autobiographies in first person singular, more precisely I am analyzing one life story (the story of Magda) with the method of narrative biography. This was a source that showed me not only the limits and experiences of the prostitutes of that age, serving as a kind of complementary source for my socio-historical work, but also the narrative urge that could lead a woman engaged in prostitution to tell her life story, exposing what she would show from herself and by what means she would

do that. It was quite interesting how the interpretive and authoritative eye of the doctor, the procurer of the writing, determines the self-representation of the woman even if he is not mentioned concretely in the text.

My related publications

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